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SUBJECT: INTERNAL DISPLACED PERSONS IN SOUTH CENTRAL IRAQ: AN UPDATE

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Hillah, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On May 24, Ali Abbass Jahaker, head of the Wasit Office, Ministry of Displacement and Migration briefed REO staff on the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) situation in South Central Iraq. Jahaker provided updated Ministry statistics for South Central IDPs: Najaf 1600 families, Wasit 1551, Karbala 1393, Qadisiyah 580, and Babil 550 for a total of 5674 families or an estimated 34,044 individuals. Jahaker noted that to date, virtually no IDPs have returned to their homes. He stated there was growing reluctance from provincial governments to rehabilitate housing and provide long term assistance that might encourage IDPs to settle permanently in the region. He characterized his Ministry's assistance as limited to initial subsistence items, and acknowledged that the main brunt of assistance in other provinces was being borne by religious organizations in Najaf and Karbala, and by a relatively effective Red Crescent in Qadisiyah. END SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) Jahaker stated that these figures were somewhat higher than the number of refugees registered by provincial governments as they include families seeking assistance, but not yet registered. He described the situation as tense in many IDP clusters throughout the region, noting that families would rather camp in the desert than suffer the humiliation of living in government-sponsored tent settlements. He said that his staff found it increasingly dangerous to repeatedly visit IDP clusters. Displaced families were now less likely to restrain themselves to questions about when additional aid would arrive, and were threatening his staff with physical violence if nothing was done.

¶3. (C) Jahaker noted that the situation was made more difficult by the increasing tendency of provincial governments to limit assistance and find ways of "encouraging" refugees to move on. He cited the example of Najaf, where the provincial government had sent up a tent center thirty kilometers from the city that housed sixty families. No one stayed there long, he said, because the living conditions were unbearable, citing a lack of potable water and numerous scorpions. Nonetheless, Jahaker said, refugees in Najaf were relatively better off than in other provinces. Religious organizations were providing extensive aid and because of the tourist infrastructure for pilgrims, there were sufficient vacant buildings to house IDPs. However, the Governor had rejected an offer by his Ministry to establish an office there. Jahaker noted that an episode involving four terrorists who had allegedly infiltrated refugees in Kufa had also alarmed the provincial government. He stated that hardening provincial attitudes throughout South Central toward

IDPs had led to some national political figures in Baghdad threatening to displace Sunni families in South Central in order to provide housing for displaced Shi'a families.

¶4. (C) Jahaker noted that provincial reluctance to begin medium and long term assistance for IDPs was hampering his Ministry's operations in the region. He stated that Najaf Governor Al-Ta'ee had initially refused a Ministry request to open an office there, and that Qadisiyah Governor Hamza was refusing to cooperate with the Ministry representative in his province. In Babil Province, the Ministry had an enthusiastic, but inexperienced representative who had yet to gain traction in providing assistance. He stated that Coalition Forces should consider the Ministry's regional offices as natural partners, given provincial government reluctance to deepen assistance and the unreliability of NGOs such as the Red Crescent.

¶5. (U) Jahaker inquired about the possibility of USAID-funded assistance in Wasit, stating that because of the province's proximity to Baghdad and geographic size, the humanitarian situation there was worse than in other South Central Provinces. He noted that a substantial percentage of families had serious medical problems. In addition, children had a high prevalence of disease and chronic medical conditions, ranging from skin rashes to cases of typhoid. He said that while some families had been able to relocate to an apartment complex outside of Al Kut originally built for Iranian refugees, many were living in abandoned or heavily damaged buildings, often relying on tarps and corrugated tin panels for shade. Jahaker also noted that the province had incarcerated two hundred Afghan families who had illegally entered Iraq from Iran. According to Jahaker, the Iraqi government intended to deport the Afghans after they served a six-month jail term, but so far, the Iranian government had refused to cooperate.

¶6. (C/NF) Bio notes: Ali Abbass Jahaker ~ grandfather and mother born in Iran~ claims to have worked as a representative of the Marjaya'a (Ayatollah Ali Sistani's religious leadership)

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in Wasit, transferring funds for the Marjaya'a since the fall of Saddam Hussein~ also claims to have been involved in the stand-up of an ad hoc local militia, the "Al Mukhtar" battalion immediately after Saddam's regime collapse~ offered to facilitate introductions to the Marjaya'a in Najaf.

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